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Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources
Chairman Mark Souder, 109th Congress

“Transit Zone Operations: Can We Sustain Record Seizures with Declining Resources”
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Chairman Souder, Ranking Member Cummings, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: I am honored to appear before you today to discuss drug interdiction in the Transit Zone. Before I proceed, I want to thank this Subcommittee for consistently supporting the President’s National Drug Control Strategy, which has been a bipartisan, bicameral success. Together, we have reduced youth drug use by 19 percent since 2001.

So far this year, our drug interdiction forces in the Transit Zone, under the able leadership of the Department of Defense’s Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-South), have seized and or disrupted more than 60 metric tons of cocaine headed to U.S. shores. This total follows three successive record-breaking years of cocaine seizures and disruptions in the Transit Zone: 252 metric tons in 2005, 219 metric tons in 2004, and 176 metric ton in 2003, for a four-year total exceeding 700 metric tons of cocaine. That is 700 metric tons of cocaine the traffickers will never be able to bring into our cities, communities, and schools; 700 tons that will not be available to overwhelm our Federal, State and local law enforcement, as happened during the 1980s; and 700 tons that will never get sold to our young people and addicted users. An analysis of last year’s Transit Zone seizures reveals incredible success stories and individual performances worthy of praise. In just the month of August 2005, for instance, JIATF-South interdicted a total of seven cocaine-laden fishing vessels, seven go-fast boats, and two motor vessels—preventing a total of 45 metric tons of cocaine from reaching the United States. A single Coast Guard vessel, the Cutter *Hamilton*, contributed to this total by interdicting four vessels hauling 13 metric tons of cocaine during a single five-week deployment.

Our interdiction successes mean hundreds of millions of dollars less for narco-terrorist groups to buy arms and explosives to continue their violent, unjust war against the Government of Colombia and the more than 40 million law-abiding Colombian people, who want only to be left to live in peace.

These extraordinary successes have taken place in a time of great challenge for the United States. Drug interdiction agencies have seen their resources deployed against an array of threats. The Department of Defense (DoD) is involved in multiple conflicts, but has still managed to deploy a robust AWACS presence to South America—a much needed capability which has freed up Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Maritime Patrol P-3 aircraft for the Maritime Patrol mission in the transit zone. Additionally, DoD has maintained support for the vital operations of JIATF-South, a key enabler that uses core military competencies to make the entire interdiction program more effective. Faced with supporting relief operations for several

hurricanes, DHS Coast Guard (USCG) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have continued to field an impressive complement of assets including a three-fold increase in CBP P-3 hours and increased Coast Guard MPA support.

Key to these successes is the collection and dissemination of actionable intelligence regarding maritime cocaine shipments. Operation Panama Express, an Organized Crime-Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) initiative managed jointly by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), DHS's Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Coast Guard, and JIATF-South has greatly expanded interdiction-related intelligence.

Traffickers understandably continue to change their tactics and increase their efforts to avoid detection. Fishing vessels and go-fast boats are moving farther out into the Eastern Pacific, to extremely remote areas west of the Galapagos Islands, testing the very limits of our interdiction assets' endurance. Traffickers have begun conducting logistical operations out of Ecuador and are using Ecuadorian-flagged ships and crews, exploiting our lack of a maritime boarding agreement with that country. Obtaining increased Ecuadorian counterdrug cooperation and a maritime boarding treaty is a top priority for the United States Government. I would like to take this opportunity to solicit this Subcommittee's and Congress's support in this effort.

Cocaine is not only a problem for the United States. All countries, to varying degrees, have drug problems, with traffickers violating borders with impunity around the globe. Traffickers continuously look to expand their markets and exploit borders. Another of JIATF-South's great strengths is its close working relationship with numerous allied countries; this is critical for the synchronization of regional counterdrug operations. Twelve countries from the Western Hemisphere and Europe have liaison officers at JIATF-South. Of particular note, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, and Canada all provide ships and/or Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) to JIATF-South interdiction operations in the Eastern Caribbean. These assets enhance our MPA and surface asset capabilities and capacity, and we greatly appreciate the support of these allies.

Principally operating in the East Caribbean and Atlantic, our allies also seized a record-breaking amount of European-bound cocaine last year—68 metric tons, compared to 38 metric tons in 2004. And, so far this year, European-bound seizures have continued at a high pace. Increased European and European-bound seizures are all indicators of increased cocaine flow to Europe and are worthy of continued observation to denote any shift in the cocaine markets from the United States to Europe, as a tightening of the U.S. market continues and as we begin to see a gradual rise in the purity-adjusted price of retail quantities of cocaine.

Transit Zone drug interdiction is a team effort and most seizures stem from successful employment of an interdiction continuum. The key ingredients of this continuum are: the generation of actionable intelligence (law enforcement); the fusing of the intelligence (JIATF-South); the detection and monitoring by Maritime Patrol Aircraft (DHS, DoD, and allied aircraft); surface asset interdiction (USCG, USN, and allied ships); and end-game take down of the vessel and seizure of the illicit cargo (USCG Law Enforcement Detachments, or LEDETs).

Each of these elements is essential to success in fighting the trafficking of drugs in the maritime arena. The absence of any one ingredient of this continuum can undermine success.

Perhaps the most important aspect in the interdiction continuum and the principal reason behind increased seizures is more and better actionable intelligence on drug movements. Much of this improved intelligence is derived from the great work being done by the men and women of *Panama Express* and DEA and ICE agents located in Source and Transit Zone countries. This improved intelligence allows for more effective use of limited ship and Maritime Patrol Aircraft assets. Instead of often wasteful, large ocean sweeps by MPA searching for drug-laden vessels, as was the case during much of the 1990s, improved intelligence now enables our interdiction assets to zero in on the target in a fraction of the time, saving incalculable ship and aircraft hours otherwise spent searching. To sum up, we are getting more for our MPA buck than ever before.

Another key component in the interdiction continuum, and a major factor behind improved end-game capability, is the U.S. Coast Guard's employment of armed MH-68 helicopters and airborne use of force (AUF)—more commonly known as the Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON). HITRON is the trafficker's worst nightmare. Flying at 140 knots, the MH-68 easily outruns the fastest go-fast boat and armed with an M-240 machine gun and laser-sighted .50 caliber sniper rifles, they are more than capable of convincing even the most desperate go-fast crew that it is in their best interest to stop. So far, in Fiscal Year 2006, HITRON has nailed 15 go-fasts, for a haul of 31 metric tons. In Fiscal Year 2005, HITRON interdicted 29 go-fasts, 12 of them at night, removing from the cocaine flow an impressive 47 metric tons of cocaine. Since its inception in 2002, HITRON has prevented 100 go-fasts from reaching their destination and more than 252 metric tons of cocaine have been captured.

In more bad news for the traffickers, last year our British allies adopted airborne use of force, using Coast Guard Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures and their own shooters. In November, 2005, the *HMS Cumberland* and its embarked helicopter stopped a go-fast in the Western Caribbean, marking the first time that the British had successfully used AUF. The *Cumberland's* capture was 88 bales, an estimated two metric tons of cocaine. In encouraging news for U.S. counterdrug efforts, the Coast Guard is currently training United States Navy (USN) helicopter crews to stand up their own AUF capability in the very near future.

Interdiction in the Transit Zone is an Administration priority, and we will continue to work diligently with United States force providers and allied nations to ensure that JIATF-South receives appropriate support. I firmly believe, however, that we can not view what goes on in the Transit Zone in a vacuum. A major part of our supply reduction policy is to kill the coca in the fields and seize it in the labs and collection points, *before* it ever makes it to the JIATF-South Area of Responsibility.

The Andean Ridge is the sole supplier of the world's cocaine and a provider of the heroin consumed in the United States. Although Colombia is the predominant source of both of these illicit drugs, any plan targeting cocaine and heroin production must consider the latent capacity within Bolivia and Peru. Drug trafficking through Ecuador and Venezuela must also be considered. The Administration's Andean Counterdrug Initiative (ACI), for which this

subcommittee has provided overwhelming support, addresses all of these concerns and is yielding promising results. President Uribe and the Government of Colombia (GOC) are firmly committed to countering the threat that drug trafficking poses to Colombia, the Western Hemisphere, and the world. In 2004, Colombia sprayed more than 131,000 hectares of coca and manually eradicated another 10,279 hectares. The Government of Colombia reported spraying more than 138,000 hectares of coca and manually eradicating more than 31,000 hectares in 2005. These efforts have reduced cultivation by one-third since 2001 and reduced potential pure cocaine production from 700 metric tons in 2001 to 430 metric tons in 2004.

Although substantial progress has been made in eradication, tactics must continually be adjusted as traffickers try to adapt to the Government of Colombia's massive eradication campaign. In fact, the shrinking and dispersal of coca fields, the systematic use of seedbeds, and countermeasures designed to make plots harder to find from the air may require additional spray planes to continue to reduce Colombian coca production. It has already required increased aerial spray and manual eradication operations. The Department of State has received authorization to spend \$30 million in FY 2006 to buy and refurbish spray aircraft for Colombia under the Critical Flight Safety Program. The State Department will receive additional funding in FY 2007 to continue this crucial safety upgrade that will bolster a much-needed aerial eradication capability in Colombia.

Reports from the field indicate that traffickers are focusing their cultivation efforts in areas that are difficult to identify from the air because of bad weather, such as Nariño. With that in mind, the Government of Colombia, with our assistance, began additional spray operations late last year in Nariño and increased manual eradication operations in eastern Colombia and the national parks where additional, previously undetected coca has been planted. The attack on opium poppy has been just as relentless. In 2004, Colombia sprayed 3,060 hectares of poppy and manually eradicated another 1,253. In 2005, Colombia sprayed more than 1,600 hectares of poppy and manually eradicated 496 hectares. Poppy cultivation has decreased by two-thirds since 2001, and potential pure heroin production decreased to 3.8 metric tons from 11.4 metric tons in 2001. These efforts have contributed greatly to the significant reductions in heroin purity that has taken place in the United States over the past two years. Colombia is also aggressively pursuing the movement of illicit drugs throughout its national territory and is seizing record quantities of cocaine, coca base, heroin, and precursor chemicals.

ACI also supports the training and equipping of Colombia's security forces to seize cocaine and destroy traffickers' cocaine production capabilities. Here also, the news is encouraging.

In 2005, Colombian security forces, as a result of years of professional U.S. law enforcement training and U.S.-provided counterdrug equipment, reported seizing more than 150 metric tons of cocaine—setting the single year record for seizures in Colombia, and more than doubling the previous year's total. Moreover, Colombian counternarcotics police, the elite "Junglas," reported destroying more than 100 cocaine HCl labs, preventing the production of an incalculable amount of cocaine before it could be produced, packaged and shipped to U.S. markets.

In one significant blow to drug trafficking interests, in May 2005, Counternarcotics Police and Colombian Navy (COLNAV) personnel, acting on a tip from the local populace, cooperated in the capture of 15 metric tons of cocaine along the Mira River, in the southern Nariño Department. This is the largest known seizure in Colombian history. The cocaine was packaged and awaiting delivery to several go-fasts that would have moved it through the Eastern Pacific for eventual delivery to points along the Mexico-Central American corridor.

In September 2005, in what is the largest seizure in Bogota's history, the Colombian National Police seized 3.5 metric tons of cocaine in a warehouse, awaiting shipment to the North Coast and then to the United States. And, so far this year, there is no indication that the GOC is weakening its resolve in going after drug traffickers: on March 12, the Colombian Army and the Attorney General's office discovered 6.3 metric tons of cocaine in a Barranquilla warehouse, cocaine that was being readied for shipment to the United States.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, there have been some notable successes in our supply reduction and interdiction programs. The United States and our allies, acting in concert through JIATF-South and in cooperation with the Government of Colombia, have obtained remarkable seizures of drugs over the last few years. However, many challenges still remain, and far too much cocaine is still reaching our shores. You have my commitment that ONDCP will not rest until we have significantly reduced cocaine availability and it ceases to be a threat to the American people.

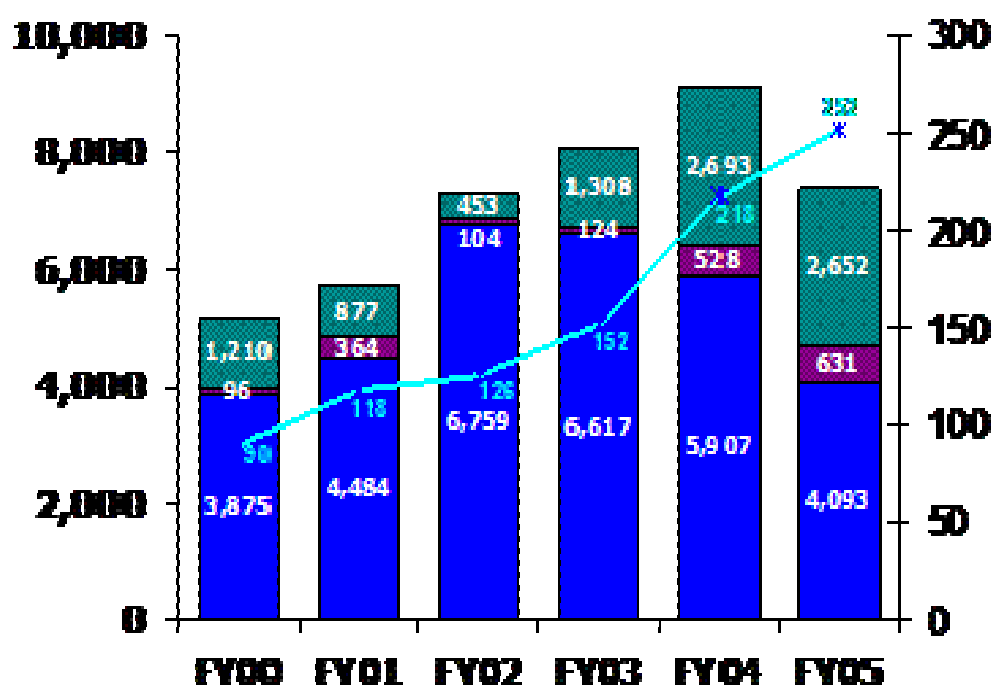


Long Range MPA Support

JLATE South FY00 – FY05

On-Station Hours

Disruptions (MT's)



■ P-3 (all sources) ■ Nimrod ■ HC-130 —*— Disruptions